



**National Association of Conservation Districts  
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**Statement of  
Bill Wilson, President  
National Association of Conservation Districts  
Relative to  
Review of USDA's Watershed Programs  
Presented to the  
House Committee on Agriculture  
Subcommittee on Conservation, Credit, Rural Development and Research  
December 6, 2005**

Chairman Lucas and members of the subcommittee, I am Bill Wilson, President of the National Association of Conservation Districts. I have served as a district official for the Haskell County Conservation District since 1980 and have served in various positions with NACD since 1994. I am also a founding member and past chair of the National Watershed Coalition, of which NACD is an active member.

I am also a registered land surveyor in Oklahoma and Arkansas and own and operate a 650-acre cow/calf, horse and mule ranch in East Central Oklahoma. I have worked for many years to restore Dust Bowl era farm fields into productive pasture land and am familiar with and employ many conservation practices on my operation.

NACD is the nongovernment organization that represents the nation's 3,000 conservation districts and the more than 16,000 men and women—district officials—who serve on their governing boards. Conservation districts are local units of government established under state laws to carry out natural resource management programs at the local level. Conservation districts, with their 7,800 employees, work closely with USDA and other federal and state agencies, as well as private sector organizations, to provide technical and other assistance to millions of landowners and operators to help them manage and protect the nation's land, water and related resources. Conservation districts provide the

linkage for delivering many federal, state and other local natural resource programs at the local level.

As the subcommittee undertakes this review of USDA's watershed programs, I want to thank you for this opportunity to appear before the subcommittee and share with you the conservation district perspective on the successes of these programs, the need for streamlining and modernizing them, and better integrating them with other USDA conservation programs.

### **Background**

Since the enactment of Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act in August 1954, conservation districts have actively worked with NRCS (formerly SCS) in carrying out the program. In fact, conservation districts are local sponsors of almost all of the more than 1,500 active or completed projects nationwide.

Through the authorities in the P.L. 534 and P.L. 566, NRCS has assisted local and state watershed project sponsors in constructing 11,000 flood control dams in 2,000 watersheds in 47 states since 1948. The Small Watersheds Program, as it is commonly known, was the first program of its kind to address natural resource conservation on a watershed-wide basis—tackling issues such as flood prevention and protection, water quality, erosion control, water supply, recreation, irrigation management, fish and wildlife habitat and wetlands protection and restoration.

### **Improved Integration and Coordination**

Since the Small Watersheds Program was created more than half century ago, many new USDA conservation programs have been created, especially since the enactment of the 1985 Food Security Act—the Conservation Reserve Program, the Wetlands Reserve Program, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program and the Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program, Grasslands Reserve Program and the Conservation Security Program. However, all of these programs are focused primarily on individual farm and ranch operations. Some critics say there is duplication among these many efforts. Let us say strongly that we do not support duplicating conservation programs on the same acres. We support coordinating and integrating the available conservation tools to solve natural resource concerns thus keeping American farm and ranch land productive and providing many public benefits, including water, soil, and air quality, open spaces, fish and wildlife habitat and other benefits.

We could accomplish more and do it more efficiently if we had improved integration and coordination of the planning and implementation of all of these programs. What is wrong with using all of the tools in our toolbox in a watershed-based approach to natural resources conservation? That wouldn't be duplication, it would be synergy. In the case of the watershed program the synergy would produce substantial benefits by treating the entire watershed natural resource concerns with the conservation programs that could protect all or most of the resources in the watershed.

And one way to promote that synergy would be through what NRCS is now calling Rapid Basin Assessments, in which watershed planning teams meet with landowners and conservation groups, inventory agricultural areas and identify conservation opportunities. The process is intended to increase speed and efficiency in guiding implementation of

conservation practices and programs. It's also intended to put more decision-making into the hands of local leaders. This approach can also lead to getting more conservation on the ground sooner as it shortens the planning period leading up to implementation.

Providing better program integration also would help people understand the program and recognize its environmental accomplishments. As it stands right now, most people who are not directly involved in the Small Watersheds Program know little about it. The Small Watersheds Program has an excellent cost-benefit return. According to the report, *Watershed Rehabilitation - A Progress Report 2005*, "These projects provide an estimated \$1.5 billion in annual benefits in reduced flooding and erosion damages, recreation, water supplies and wildlife habitat."

In another criticism concerning duplication, I must also point out that some critics have asked that since the US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) and Bureau of Reclamation carry out extensive "watershed" programs, why does USDA need to duplicate those efforts? That criticism demonstrates a basic misunderstanding of the purposes of these programs. USACE and Reclamation carry out large federal projects, including some large watershed ones. Both their purposes and their scales are fundamentally different. The operational agreements among the three organizations have positioned the 566 program to address the smaller watersheds, typically including those less than 250,000 acres, leaving the larger projects to the other organizations.

### **Funding Issues**

Funding is a serious issue facing the Small Watersheds Program. Over the past decade funding for the program has been in constant decline, while funding needs have increased. While we are pleased that Congress chose to fund the program at a level higher than that requested by the Administration, we can still document funding needs nearly \$175 million higher than the FY'06 appropriated level.

While fully funding the program to meet the documented needs remains our highest priority, we also raise some issues on how allocations are made. In several fiscal years since 1993, earmarks for watershed appropriations have actually exceeded the funding levels themselves. In fact, over past several years, earmarks have exceeded the appropriation by up to 30 percent. This earmarking ends up creating a larger waiting list for funding of other projects, adding to the already enormous backlog.

We find this troubling for more than one reason. First, it makes both the agency's and sponsors' planning process very difficult. Both know that even if they successfully navigate all the procedures and requirements to get a project approved, they'll still need an earmark to get a project funded. It also gives the technical staff at NRCS no discretion to use sound science to determine the priorities and best and most conservation-effective use of program funds. We do not mean to imply that the work being done, even using "earmarked" funding, is not good, high priority work. The projects are still being planned and implemented using sound science and tested technology.

### **Project Backlog**

To address the backlog created in part by earmarking, some have suggested that NRCS review and perhaps sunset some of the backlog. Part of the problem in doing that is the projects are locally supported with the potential of partial federal funding. In many cases,

states, conservation districts, local communities and other sponsors have invested significant funds, acquired land rights and made promises to citizens, with the only remaining need being the federal commitment. In my local watershed, the state has already made surveys, held many public meetings promoting the project, plans have been drawn and planning commitments made. At the very least, state and local sponsors should be part of the review process in determining whether or not a project should be sunsetted to establish a balance of authorized and implemented projects.

We believe the proper course of action in the long-term is for the Administration and Congress to support funding for projects as they are planned, thus eliminating the existing back-log over time and avoiding the creation of a backlog in the future.

### **Small Watershed Rehabilitation Program**

Another issue I would like to address is the Small Watershed Rehabilitation component of the program. Under your leadership Congress adopted the Watershed Rehabilitation Act of 2000. The act recognized that most watershed infrastructure, facilities or structures, including dams, were designed with a 50-year lifespan and that many have reached or exceeded that; and that many more will in upcoming years. The statute stated it was “to provide cost share assistance for the rehabilitation of structural measures constructed as part of water resource projects previously funded by the Secretary under such Act or related laws.”

The law, targeted to address structures built under the P.L. 534 and P.L. 566 programs, authorized \$90 million over five years (2001 to 2005) for USDA to provide financial and technical assistance to cover a portion of the costs to review, re-assess, re-plan or update the watershed plan and to rehabilitate aging structures. The local sponsors were required to provide 35 percent of the costs.

The 2002 Farm Security and Rural Investment Act increased the funding authorization and extended the program through 2007. Although \$31.5 million was appropriated this year for the Rehabilitation Program, that is a little more than half the authorized amount. None of the \$240 million authorized in mandatory funding has been used.

According to the Association of State Dam Safety Officials, there are more than 1,000 community-sponsored, USDA-assisted dams throughout the United States that are over 40 years old. USDA's own figures support this fact and have been well documented.

In those same 40-plus years, many of the communities have changed and downstream developments have sprung up in the shadow of many of these aging structures. Getting a handle on repairing, upgrading, or in some cases de-commissioning them isn't just a matter of money. It's a matter of public health and safety.

Work carried out under the Small Watershed Rehabilitation Program will likely carry forward a number of years into the future. As we go forward in reviewing, re-assessing, re-planning and updating these watershed plans, we should take advantage of the tremendous opportunities available to integrate those planning efforts with the planning activities for CRP, EQIP, WRP, WHIP, FRLPP, GRP and the CSP.

### **Emergency Watershed Protection Program**

Section 216 of the Flood Control Act of 1950 established the Emergency Watershed Protection Program (EWP). The program's purpose is to undertake emergency measures to prevent soil erosion and runoff and undertake measures to safeguard lives and property from floods, drought and erosion on any watershed whenever fire, flood or any other natural occurrence.

While it is not necessary for a national emergency to be declared for an area to be eligible for assistance, the EWP has been instrumental in implementing emergency measures to relieve imminent hazards to life and property created by natural disasters. It provides financial and technical assistance for debris removal, protecting destabilized streambanks, establishing cover on critically eroding lands and repairing conservation practices. NRCS also has authority to purchase floodplain easements to take people and property out of harm's way.

The EWP is generally funded through emergency appropriations in response to natural disasters. Currently, USDA estimates the backlog for assistance requests under EWP is about \$800 million. Conservation districts support creating a separate, stand-alone account that would be a revolving or base account funded during the annual appropriations process to expedite emergency response to disasters.

Mr. Chair and members of the subcommittee, I again thank you for the opportunity to present NACD's views on USDA's watershed programs. As always, we in the conservation community are ready and willing to work with you to find solutions to the issues discussed here today.